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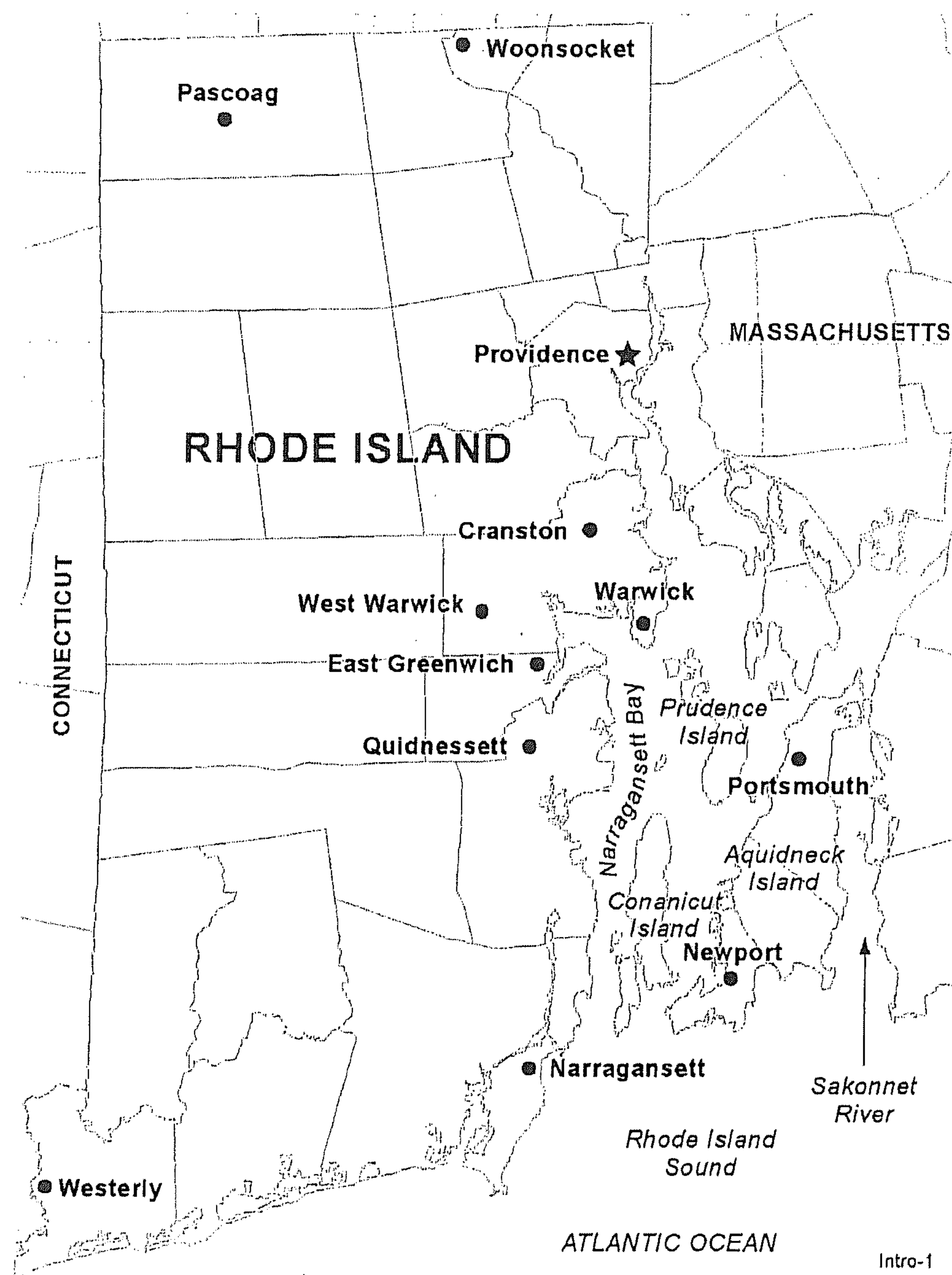
RHODE ISLAND

THE STATION CLUB FIRE AFTER-ACTION REPORT

STATE, LOCAL, AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

"This report will enable the State of Rhode Island to gather and review information on how key components of the State, Local and Federal governments, as well as the private sector, responded and coordinated assets *during and after* the West Warwick Station Nightclub Fire."

—Governor Donald L. Carcieri



Minutes after 11:00 p.m. on Thursday, February 20, 2003, sparks from a pyrotechnic display ignited the foam soundproofing insulation on the stage behind the rock band "Great White" during its opening number at the Station club in West Warwick, RI. Within seconds, the flames raced across the ceiling, enveloping the nightclub in billowing black smoke. In a matter of minutes, the raging fire claimed 96 lives and injured more than 200 others. Four of the injured subsequently died from their wounds, raising the total number of fatalities to 100.

Although the cause of the fire is under investigation by proper authorities, the response to this horrific event also merits detailed scrutiny. An unintended accident that occurred in a notably confined space within a residential setting in the smallest State in the Union, the Station club fire possesses important characteristics often associated with a potential terrorist strike. It occurred without warning, at a site crowded with unsuspecting patrons, and in a densely populated region of the country. It caused immediate mass casualties and fatalities far beyond the experience of the local response community.

This event also provided an unexpected, but nonetheless thorough, test of the plans, procedures, equipment, personnel, and capabilities that comprise the Rhode Island emergency management system, including volunteer organizations and applicable Federal response resources. The lessons learned regarding the response to this event will help authorities in Rhode Island better prepare for future cataclysmic events, regardless of their cause. Equally important, they can be extrapolated so that other communities across the country can fit them to their particular circumstances, thus providing a baseline for tangible grassroot improvement of the Nation's homeland security.

The Process and Methodology

In a meeting at the Rhode Island State Capital on May 21, 2003, Governor Donald L. Carcieri and other State leaders agreed that the focus of the After-Action Report (AAR) would be exclusively on response and recovery activities and actions during and after the fire. The holistic report would convey, through the eyes of the response community, what went well, what challenges were encountered and how they were met, and the impediments that must now be removed. The primary goal of the project would be to identify opportunities to improve future response capabilities. In a June 13, 2003, letter to State and local officials and to leaders of volunteer organizations, Governor Carcieri conveyed the purpose and intent of this project (see **Appendix 1 – Governor's Letter**).

Between June 17 and July 3, 2003, the project team met with leaders and selected staff members of key State and municipal organizations to describe the process and seek their support and cooperation, which was forthcoming almost without reservation. The grand jury investigation, ongoing at the time, produced hesitancy, as might be expected among some responders, but, in most cases, did not prohibit efforts to gather data from alternative sources. However, concerns voiced by the Rhode Island Attorney General's Office impacted the timely completion of this report by prohibiting discussions with first responders and other critical organizations for a period of approximately 80 days while agreements among various parties were achieved. Additionally, access to a report published by the Rhode Island Association of Fire Chiefs was denied. This report would have added precision to some of the facts regarding the numbers and identity of responding organizations.

Another important constraint was that West Warwick Fire Chief Charles Hall did not permit direct contact with members of the West Warwick Fire Department (WWFD), although he was forthright in discussions with the project team. Thus, the information reported in **Annex A – Fire Department Operations** reflects discussions with most of the mutual-aid fire department chiefs and firefighters and with Chief Hall, but not firefighters from West Warwick.

In the weeks following the initial orientation meetings, project team functional area lead analysts and other project staff met with individuals and groups from throughout the broad response community. Participants included elected, appointed, and career State and local officials; members of supporting mutual-aid organizations; Federal agency representatives; and volunteer organizations such as the American Red Cross and The Salvation Army. More than 116 interviews and group debriefings directly engaged approximately 200 individuals in the review process. Concurrently, the project team collected and reviewed dozens of documents, plans, standard operating procedures, logs and journals, media articles, analytical and academic papers, and other records of the event (see **Appendix 3 – After-Action Report Project Team** for additional information on the project team members).

The information gathered during this data collection process was analyzed and topically organized within each functional area. For example, within **Annex D – Emergency Management System and Operations**, information addresses initial response; command, control, and coordination; policies, plans, and procedures; and other relevant topics. The *findings*, acquired directly from the response community during the data collection process, are organized under subtopics so that related information drawn from a wide variety of sources leads to specific observations. Thus each set of *findings*, from which *recommendations* are ultimately derived, supports a general observation.

As the functional area analytical teams compiled critical pieces of the evolving report, a detailed and painstaking multitiered validation process commenced. First, all members of a particular functional area analytical team reviewed the compiled material to ensure it was complete, accurate, and properly stated. Second, each draft functional area annex was reviewed independently by all the other functional area analytical teams to identify conflicting information or apparent inaccuracies based on the unique perspectives of different constituencies. After resolving discrepancies identified during this internal review, the functional area lead analyst presented the draft annex to selected members of the appropriate segment of the Rhode Island response community for review and validation. A total of 50 members from the various Rhode Island subject area constituencies participated in this validation review. Their charge was to read the material and identify any factual inaccuracies or glaring omissions. Participants were advised that they might disagree with some of the content, which was drawn from many different sources, but that did not necessarily mean that it was erroneous. The resulting comments were then incorporated into the draft annex or were otherwise resolved.

Following this third step in the review and validation process, the various functional area annexes were brought together for the first time. Graphics, photographs, and other supporting materials were added. The draft report was properly formatted and underwent editorial review. Finally, the fully compiled camera-ready draft was submitted for review by representatives of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (USDHS), Office for Domestic Preparedness (ODP) and by a select committee organized by the Rhode Island Governor's Office.

This report is organized into the following six annexes that describe specific functional areas:

- Annex A – Fire Department Operations
- Annex B – Emergency Medical Services
- Annex C – Law Enforcement
- Annex D – Emergency Management System and Operations

- Annex E – Public Health, Healthcare Facilities, Mental Health, and Mass Fatality Management
- Annex F – Family Services and Support

Each annex includes sections that describe the observations, findings, and recommendations pertaining to that functional area.

The remainder of this Introduction is intended to provide sufficient background so that readers understand the unique circumstances surrounding this event. It describes the State of Rhode Island—its history, demographics, government structure, and provisions for emergency management. It also describes the town of West Warwick, along with its government infrastructure and emergency response resources. This section also presents the tragic events of the evening of February 20, 2003, as they occurred at the Station club. Finally, it describes four representative overarching issues that others should emulate and four that Rhode Island must address.

Setting the Stage

History and Culture

Rhode Island is something of an enigma for most Americans. Its diminutive size, geographically the smallest member of the United States, is common knowledge. With a population of slightly more than 1 million, only seven States have fewer residents. But it is also the second most densely populated State, with more than 1,000 people per square mile; only New Jersey is more crowded. Nearly half of the population of Rhode Island lives within a comfortable 20-minute car ride from the State House. When one thinks of crashing waves, sand dunes, sea shells, and meandering beaches, images of the Carolinas, Florida, and California come to mind. Yet tiny Rhode Island, comprising 35 separate islands and 400 miles of shoreline, properly earns its title as “the Ocean State.”

In many respects, modern Rhode Island is the offspring of its unique and colorful history. The land was once home to 20,000 Native Americans—fishermen, farmers, hunters, and, sometimes, warriors. Many of the rivers, streams, mountains, other terrain features, and even population centers still bear names reflecting this Native American heritage, including Narragansett Bay, Conanicut Island, the Woonasquatucket River, Pawtucket, Scituate, and Woonsocket. Others were named for, or by, early European explorers. Block Island, the quintessential summer vacation destination, is named for Dutch explorer Adriaen Block, who visited the area in 1614. Rhode Island traces its own name to the 1524 observation of Italian navigator Giovanni de Verrazano, who noted that the area was reminiscent of the Greek Isle of Rhodes. Ironically, the smallest of the United States has the longest official State name, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, originally bestowed by a Royal Charter granted by King Charles II on July 8, 1663, and subsequently retained in the 1843 State Constitution. The first governor of Rhode Island, elected by popular vote and designated as such in the 1663 Royal Charter, was the Honorable Benedict Arnold, grandfather of his dishonorable namesake.

In some ways, Rhode Island is a State of contradictions. On May, 4, 1776, it became the first colony to declare its independence from the Crown, yet it is the last of the original 13 colonies to ratify the Constitution. Having renounced one external political authority, its citizens were apparently reluctant to quickly accept another. Similarly, although its shipping industry profited greatly by transporting slaves to the United States, Rhode Island enacted the first law banning slavery and, during the Civil War, it raised the all-black regiment celebrated in the movie *Glory*.

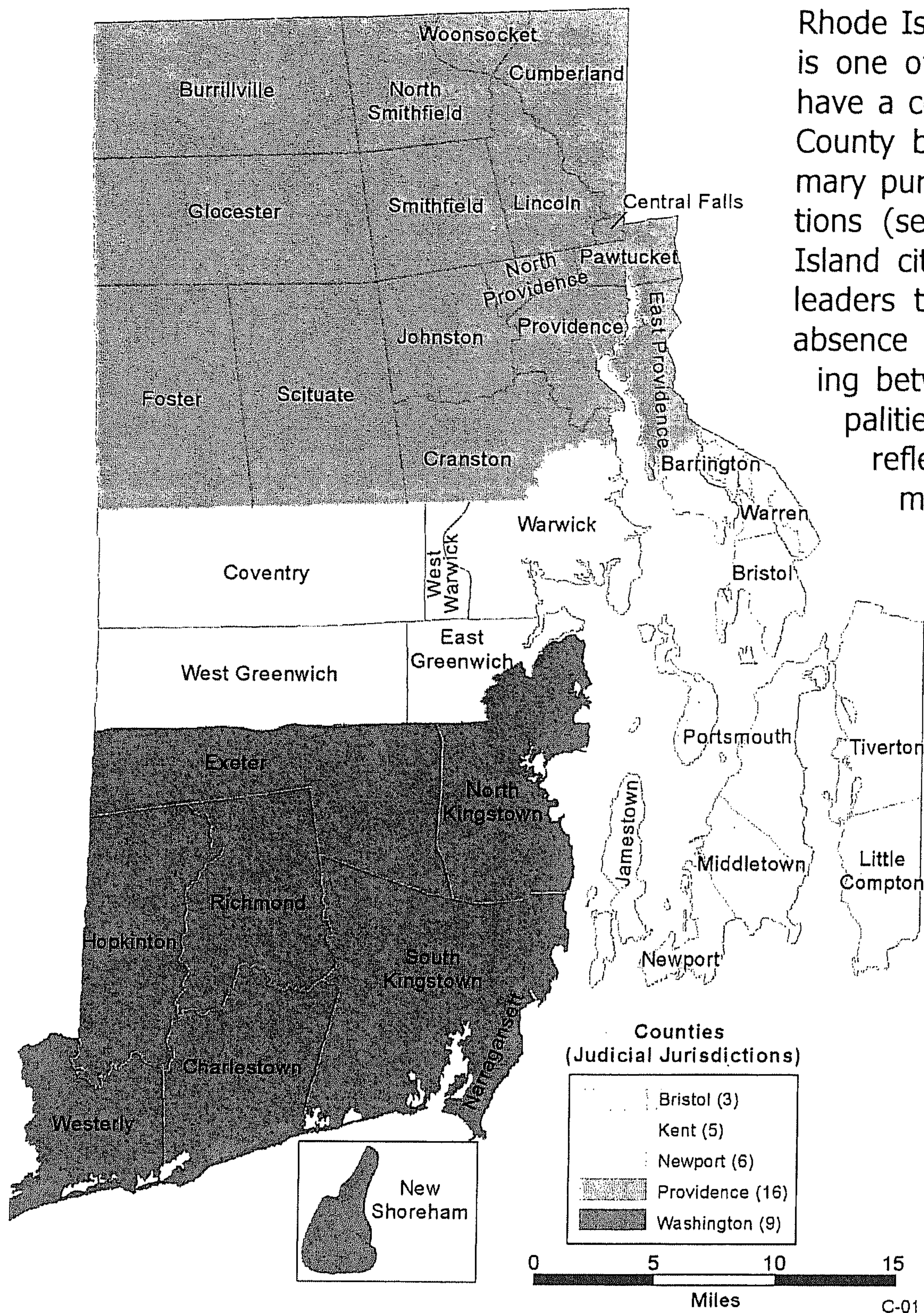
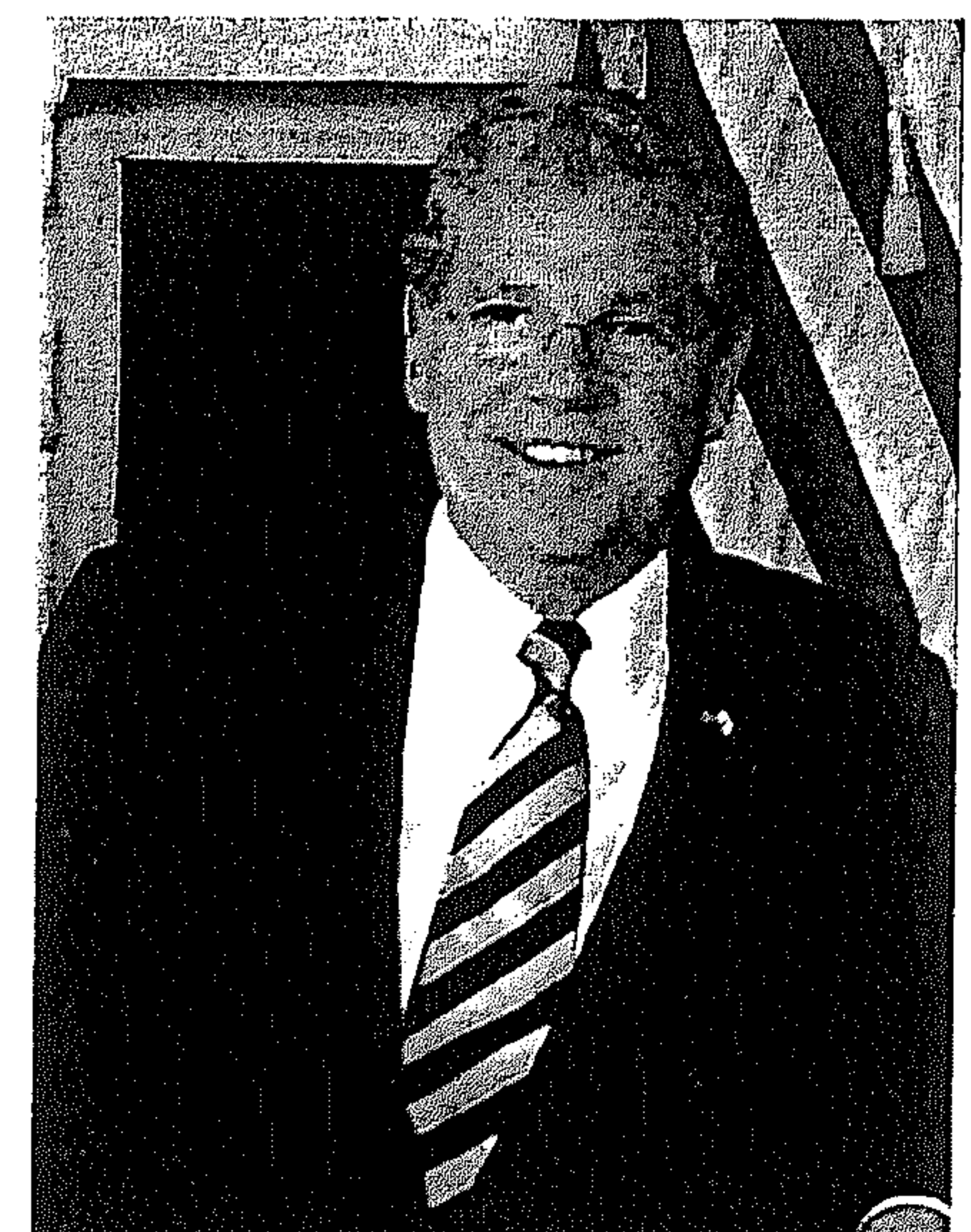


Figure 1. Area map of Rhode Island.

Rhode Island is "America's city-State." It is one of only two States that does not have a county government infrastructure. County boundaries exist but for the primary purpose of defining judicial jurisdictions (see **Figure 1**). When a Rhode Island city or town needs assistance, its leaders turn directly to the State. The absence of additional bureaucratic layering between Rhode Island's 39 municipalities and its State government reflects a historic distrust of government intervention that has its roots deeply seated in the colonial era. It is not by accident that the official State operations handbook is titled *The Rhode Island Government Owner's Manual*.

Rhode Island State Government

The governor of Rhode Island is elected every 4 years and is limited to two terms in office. He or she is the Chief Executive of the State and the Commander-in-Chief of the National Guard, ultimately responsible for the safety and security of the citizens of Rhode Island. Donald L. Carcieri was elected governor on November 5, 2002, and took the oath of office on January 6, 2003, just 6 weeks before the Station club fire.



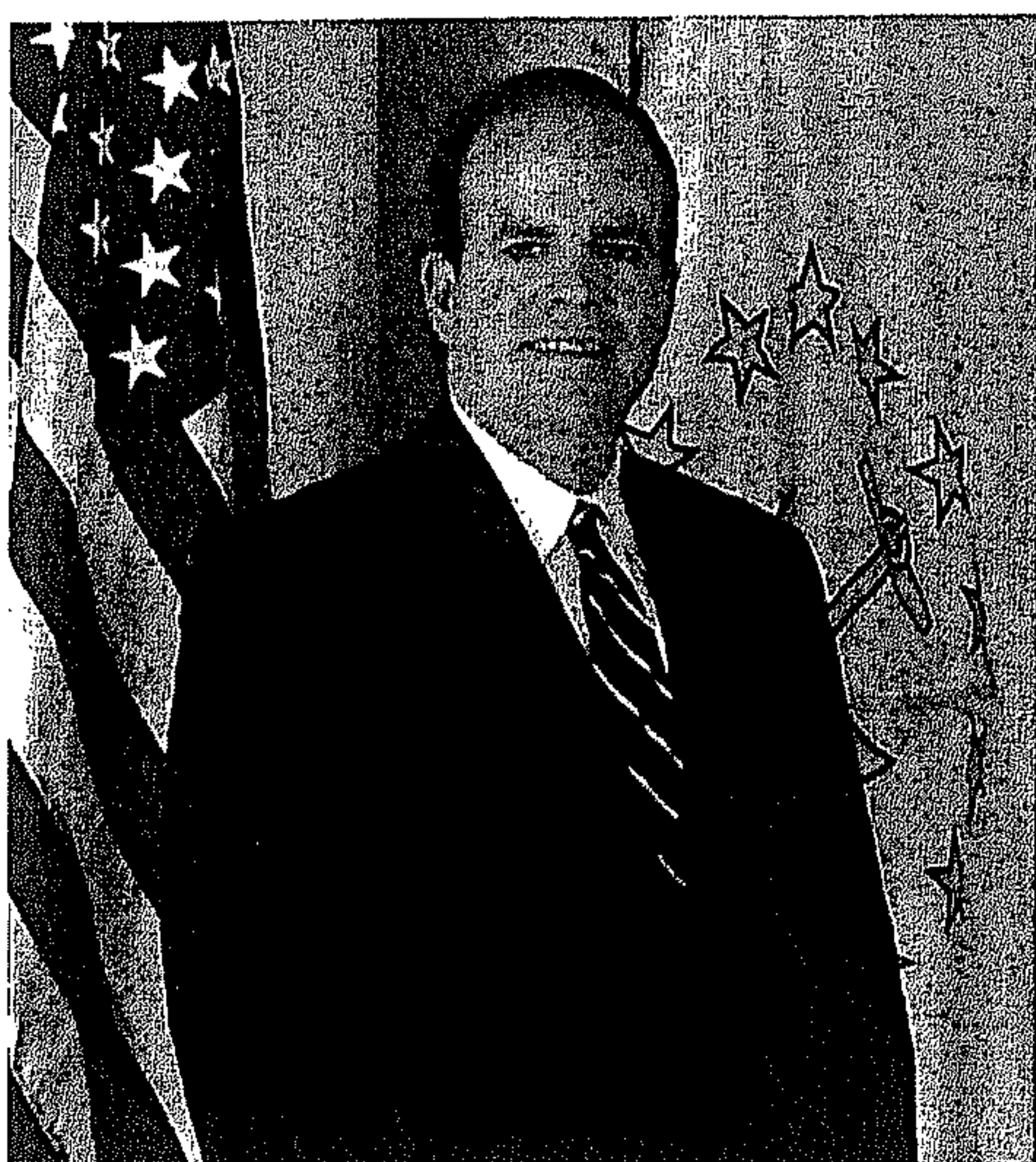
**Governor
Donald L. Carcieri**

The adjutant general of Rhode Island is appointed by the governor and serves as the Commanding General of the National Guard. He or she is also designated as the director of the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency (RIEMA) and, since October 2001, as homeland security advisor. The current adjutant general is Major General Reginald A. Centracchio. He has served in that capacity since 1995 and was reappointed by Governor Carcieri in January 2003.



**Major General
Reginald A. Centracchio**

In the event of a crisis or disaster, RIEMA is charged with protecting lives and property through mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. It publishes and maintains the all-hazard Rhode Island Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) and requires that municipalities possess complementary plans. In 1996, RIEMA moved from the Rhode Island State House to the National Guard complex adjacent to the John O. Pastore Center, approximately 10 miles from the Capital. Its facilities include office space for RIEMA's staff as well as a small Emergency Operations Center (EOC) planning area. A larger EOC operations area is regularly used as a shared National Guard and RIEMA classroom, which must be reconfigured and properly equipped to support emergency operations. Mr. Albert Scappaticci is the RIEMA executive director.



**Lieutenant Governor
Charles J. Fogarty**

To advise the governor on matters pertaining to emergency preparedness, Title 30 of the Rhode Island General Laws prescribes an emergency preparedness advisory council chaired by the lieutenant governor with the adjutant general as vice chairperson. The council has 31 members, 16 ex officio members specified in the law, and 15 members appointed by and serving at the pleasure of the governor. It traditionally convenes quarterly to receive briefings and reports on various emergency preparedness topics and to provide direction and guidance regarding preparedness issues. However, since the Station club fire and during periods of heightened alert, the council meets more frequently. Its working groups and subcommittees meet more often and regularly report progress to the advisory council. It has no operational responsibilities.

Rhode Island Local Government

Although the specific nature and composition of municipal government varies throughout Rhode Island, each of the 39 cities and towns has a designated emergency management director. In a few cases, these are full-time, dedicated municipal employees. Other towns have part-time paid directors. In the smallest jurisdictions, emergency management is an additional assignment for one of the regular town employees. About half of the towns and cities have applied for and received Federal Emergency Management Performance Grant funds administered by RIEMA.

West Warwick is the tenth largest Rhode Island municipality, with a population of nearly 30,000. It is also the youngest community in the State of Rhode Island. Established in 1913, West Warwick is one of only two towns formed during the twentieth century in Rhode Island. It has a council-manager form of government. The five Town Council members are elected for 2-year terms and choose from among their ranks a Council president. The current president of

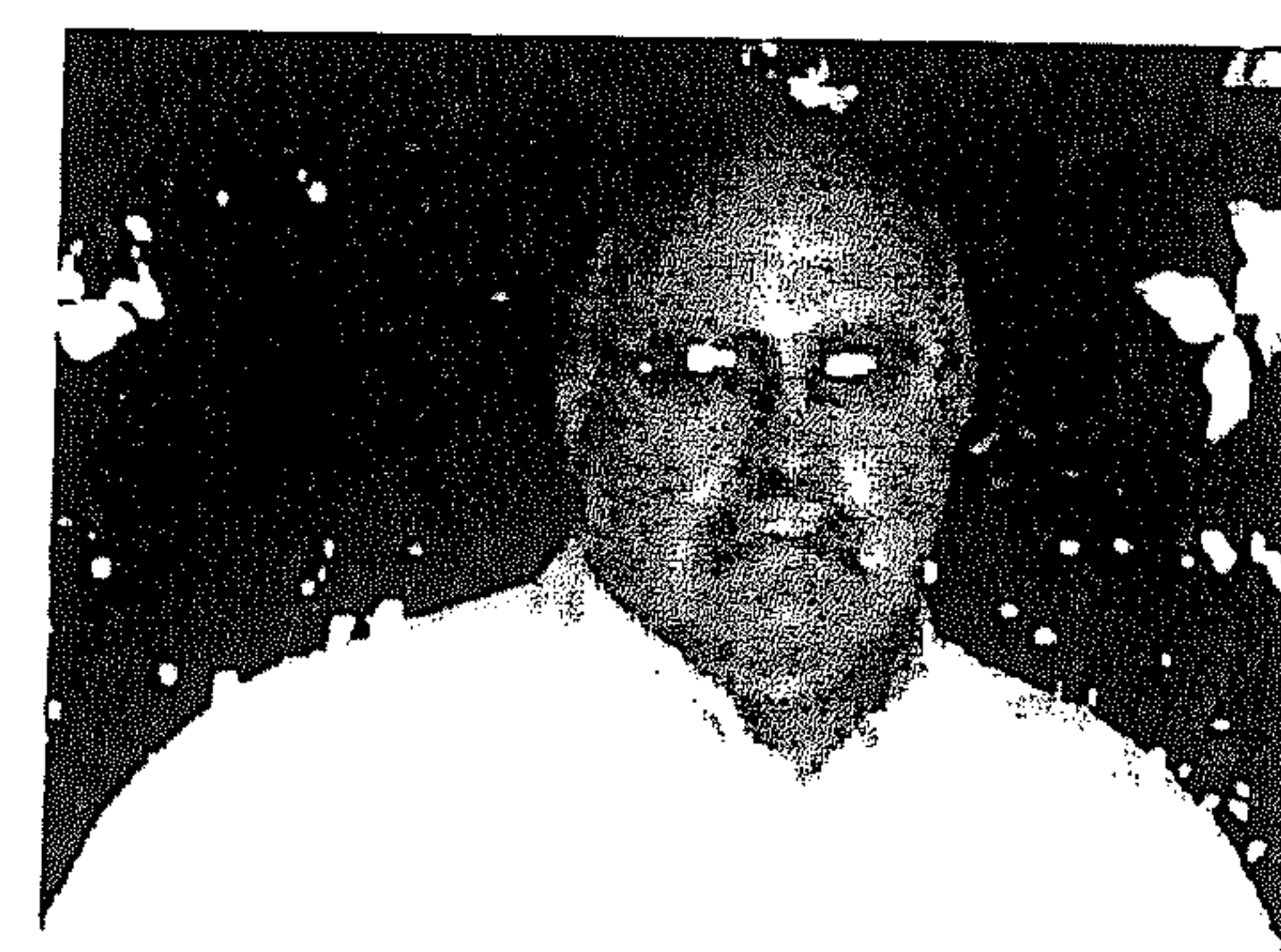
the West Warwick Town Council is Ms. Jeanne-Marie DiMasi. The Town Council appoints the town manager, who serves as chief executive. Mr. Wolfgang Bauer is the current West Warwick town manager and Mr. Thomas Senerchia is the West Warwick emergency management director.



Jeanne-Marie DiMasi



Wolfgang Bauer



Thomas Senerchia

West Warwick's fire and police departments are responsible for protecting property and ensuring public safety. The WWFD, under the leadership of Chief Hall, has 66 career fire-fighters and emergency medical professionals, operating from four fire stations. Police Chief Peter Brousseau, with 22 years on the force and 4 years as chief, leads a department of 57 sworn officers and 13 civilians. Mutual aid from neighboring communities reinforces organic fire and police resources when circumstances are beyond the capacity of West Warwick.

Taken as a whole, the Rhode Island emergency management structure has a certain homespun character. At its base are citizen-volunteers. In the case of West Warwick, these volunteers are led by one of their own, in a part-time municipal position. They devote time, energy, and often more tangible assets on behalf of the citizens of West Warwick when disaster strikes, coordinating external support not otherwise available to the town's first responders. West Warwick fire and police departments are minimally staffed with career professionals who rely on neighboring communities for reinforcements when confronted with extraordinary circumstances. Statewide resources are readily accessible through RIEMA and, when necessary, the governor can obtain support from neighboring States and from the Federal Government. This bottom-up approach to emergency management is emblematic of the tradition of independence embedded in this cradle of American democracy.

The Event

The watering hole most recently known as The Station was a West Warwick fixture spanning six decades—a landmark for some, an eyesore for others. A low-slung, nondescript building, its name changed frequently over the years, usually signaling a change in ownership: The Wheel, Red Fox, Tammany Hall, Glen's Pub, Papa Brillo's, and Cracker Jacks. In its most recent incarnation, the Station club had established a reputation as a gathering place for fans of rock music.



The Station club before the fire.

The mural portrays images of Janis Joplin, Steven Tyler, Elvis, Jimi Hendrix, and Ozzy Osbourne.

The return of the 1980's band Great White, which performed at the Station club in 2000 shortly after it reopened under its current ownership, was widely anticipated. A total of 115 tickets were sold in advance of the scheduled February 20 performance, and another 50 tickets were distributed through local radio stations promoting the show. Ticket sales at the door were brisk.

A few minutes after 11:00 p.m., Great White took to the stage before a crowd already primed by the pounding rhythms of earlier performers. As lead singer Jack Russell launched into the opening song, "Desert Moon," a display of pyrotechnics intended to further enthrall the rock-and-roll crowd was set off between the drummer, seated in a rear alcove, and the other members of the band. The pyrotechnics quickly ignited a portion of the wall behind the band. As the flames took hold and began to spread, it took several seconds for the crowd to recognize that something had gone horribly awry. A local television cameraman filming the performance was able to capture the next several desperate minutes as revelers struggled to escape the blazing inferno.



WPRI-TV Channel 12



WPRI-TV Channel 12

Pyrotechnics are lit as part of Great White's stage act, igniting portions of the wall behind the band.

Tests conducted in the wake of the disaster by the National Institute of Standards and Technology concluded that most of the 96 fatalities found inside the club died within the first few minutes. According to a December 7, 2003, article by *The Providence Journal*, at about 1 minute, 25 seconds, the video shows two people emerging from the greenhouse-style window near the front door. Heavy black smoke is seen pouring from the window. At about 1 minute, 36 seconds, the camera captures fallen people wedged in a pile at the front door. By about 2 minutes, 6 seconds after the fire started, the thick black smoke is streaming from nearly every opening in the building—people are still fleeing through doors and broken windows.

Individual and Organizational Special Achievement

During the extensive interview process for this report, respondents were invited to comment on any aspect of response and recovery that was particularly successful, favorable, or beneficial. The examples that follow are representative of those comments. The selfless performance of these individuals and organizations exemplify the compassion and ingenuity that characterized Rhode Island's response to a human tragedy of unimaginable proportions. Their stories, and those of countless others described in this report, are testimony to the indomitable strength of community that binds all Americans when confronted with adversity.

Mr. Peter Todd, a retired Rhode Island National Guard Command Sergeant Major, has worked for RIEMA for more than 15 years and is currently the Rhode Island radiological officer. His responsibilities deal primarily with problem detection and population protection associated with the nuclear power plants located in nearby Plymouth, MA, and in Waterford, CT. When Mr. Todd responded to RIEMA Operations Chief Diana Arcand's call for help at 2:00 a.m. on February 21, he brought with him an invaluable network of personal and professional associations, uncommon powers of persuasion, and an incredible dedication to successfully completing even the most challenging assignment. Among his many noteworthy accomplishments, possibly the most spectacular was the transformation in less than 36 hours of a vacant 25,000-square-foot automobile dealership into a fully equipped and furnished office complex where government and private organizations provided advice and assistance to victims' families. The Family Resource Center (FRC) operated from 10:00 a.m. on February 26, 2003, until 6:00 p.m. on March 14, 2003. Mr. Todd contacted long-standing friends and associates in every relevant field of endeavor, arranging for telephone lines, computers and network connectivity, and office machines and supplies. He arranged for the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RI DOC) Prison Industries to provide furniture and office partitions. He negotiated with adjoining businesses to prevent media broadcast vehicles from parking in areas inappropriately close to the grieving families. Virtually all materials needed to operate and sustain those working at or using the FRC were donated by local businesses or service providers. Because of the generous donation of time, facilities, and materials, the total cost to the government after nearly 3 weeks of operations is estimated at less than \$5,000. Mr. Todd's final act was to write a thank you note to every person who donated time or materials at the FRC. That personal acknowledgment is precisely why Mr. Todd was able to accomplish so much with so little.

In the wake of a devastating incident, help comes from many predictable sources, and a few that are not predictable. One would not normally expect, however, that the corrections community would assume a significant role in the recovery process. In the case of the Station club fire, RI DOC became an invaluable source of resources and support. Charged with custody over an average daily incarcerated population of 3,500 persons, RI DOC is a fully self-sustained operation. It has every capability one would find in other population centers: healthcare staff and facilities, electricians, plumbers, computer and communications technicians, commercial food services, transportation, and much more, along with the requisite administrative and management staff. Although RI DOC is not listed in the Rhode Island Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), on Friday morning, February 21, 2003, Director Ashbel T. Wall instructed Mr. James Berard, the associate director for Management Information, to offer RIEMA any assistance needed in response to the Station club fire. In the subsequent hours, days, and weeks, RI DOC was an important part of almost every dimension of the recovery process. Communications and network engineers installed telephone lines and computer networks. RI DOC computer

programmers constructed and installed custom database systems at RIEMA headquarters (HQ) and at the FRC. Twenty-four volunteers from the RI DOC Public Information Office and its trained hostage negotiation teams manned eight of the victim information hotline telephones working three 8-hour shifts. The two RI DOC psychiatrists were present at each hotline shift change to debrief the outgoing volunteers. Other Rhode Island volunteers staffed the computer network at the FRC, entering data collected during the entitlement and support application process. The RI DOC kitchen staff delivered meals for persons working at RIEMA HQ. The scores of RI DOC volunteers, including some of the most senior staff, contributed hundreds of hours, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, yet the volunteers did not record any overtime. Each acted on a purely personal commitment to help their stricken neighbors.

West Warwick Council Member Leo Constantino was elected to public office for the first time in November 2000. A semi-retired businessman, Mr. Constantino had for some time been very active in West Warwick youth programs. A U.S. Marine Corps Vietnam veteran, he is a sailing instructor in the summer months and a ski instructor during the winter. Mr. Constantino was at the New Hampshire ski resort where he is employed when he learned of the Station club fire. He returned to Rhode Island on Saturday, February 22, 2003, where his instincts led him to the Family Assistance Center (FAC) at the Crowne Plaza Hotel. He was stunned at what he found. Grief-stricken family groups sat in somber clusters throughout the huge ballroom. Some groups formed links and eventually merged into one, offering comfort to each other's members. Other family groups stayed to themselves, sharing their agony only with one another.

Mr. Constantino wanted to help, but didn't have any idea how a novice public official could be of service. He wandered unobtrusively among the distressed families, introducing himself only if an occasion to do so was apparent. He listened to their conversations, searching for clues to help define his own role. His youth work over the years had acquainted Mr. Constantino with Mr. Tom Iannitti, the director of West Warwick Department of Human Services (WW DHS). He telephoned Mr. Iannitti and described his dilemma. Mr. Iannitti suggested that he remain at the FAC and stay in touch with the WW DHS. Before long, Mr. Constantino began to understand some of the seemingly insignificant issues that were quickly becoming a major irritant to victims' family members. An automobile that could not be located at the Station club scene, the need to replace house and car keys melted in the fire, transportation for a dozen family members to a Massachusetts hospital where a survivor was located, and many similar situations added to the difficulty of the situation. Mr. Constantino soon became a recognizable resource whose help was increasingly sought as he worked with Mr. Iannitti on behalf of his distressed constituents.



Agence France-Presse

**Family and friends
comfort one another.**

One relationship is particularly revealing about the value of Mr. Constantino's efforts. Over the next several days, he became especially close to an elderly gentleman who had driven from Pennsylvania to await definitive information about his son, who had been at the Station club that fateful night. The son's remains were eventually identified and his father asked that they be cremated, after which he would take them with him back to Pennsylvania. On the day his son's remains were scheduled for release, the father told Mr. Constantino that he would like to meet and thank the West Warwick officials who had been so kind and thoughtful throughout

the ordeal. They first went to the West Warwick Town Hall, where the father met Town Manager Bauer, Mr. Iannitti, and several other town employees. Next, they traveled to the fire station that first responded to the blaze. Each stop was an emotional catharsis. Although the employees at Town Hall had been fully absorbed in response and recovery activities for every waking hour since the fire, few had dealt face-to-face with a victim or immediate family member. In this case, the father wanted each of them to know something personal about the son whom he loved so dearly. When it was time to pick up the remains, Mr. Constantino insisted on driving the father to the funeral home. He did not want him to suffer through the experience alone. From the funeral home, the two men drove in silence to the FRC, where the father had left his car. Mr. Constantino carefully held the box containing the urn, while the father unlocked the car. They placed the remains in the front passenger seat and secured the seat belt. The father placed a photograph of his son, which he had shared with West Warwick officials, inside the cover of the box with the remains. Worried about his new friend's well-being, Mr. Constantino asked if the father would be okay and suggested he delay the drive until the following morning. The father put his hand on the box in the passenger seat and replied that with his son at his side, he would be just fine and that they would take their time on the drive home. While a grief-stricken father sought comfort and solace after losing his beloved son, a novice public official searched for a meaningful role in the midst of an egregious human tragedy.

The name most frequently mentioned as a positive force in these challenging circumstances was that of Governor Carcieri. At the time of the fire the governor was out of the State. He returned early on Friday morning and immediately took control. He set priorities, insisting that the victim identification investigation be pursued diligently and without interruption until every deceased victim was known and every family notified. He spoke with the families frequently, sharing with them the latest information so they were not caught off guard by public news reports. He promised them help in obtaining support from State, Federal, and nongovernment agencies. Toward that end, he directed the establishment of the FRC, which remained in operation until every family had obtained all the necessary available assistance. He visited injured victims in Rhode Island and Massachusetts hospitals and prayed at memorial services and funerals with the families of those who had died. One senior community leader who actively participated in response and recovery efforts, and who admits that he did not vote for Governor Carcieri, described the situation this way: "He was elected in November, sworn into office in January, and became our governor in February."

The Results

The Station club fire is the second deadliest U.S. nightclub fire in the past 50 years. A total of 100 persons died, more than 25 percent of the occupants of the building that night. It is estimated that 230 people were hurt, many with serious life-threatening injuries. Seventy-eight children lost one or both parents. It is estimated that the lives of between 5,000 and 6,000 persons—family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers of victims—have been irreversibly altered by this tragedy. According to materials prepared in support of Rhode Island's request for an emergency response Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grant, 583 fire, police, and emergency medical personnel responded to the fire.

The healing process continues in Rhode Island and in the surrounding communities affected by this event and its aftermath. Important changes have already occurred to prevent similar disasters. On July 7, 2003, Governor Carcieri signed new fire regulations that many consider the toughest in the country.

This AAR contains more than 375 recommendations aimed at improving all aspects of response and recovery. Although the recommendations are directly applicable to Rhode Island, many are also pertinent to other communities seeking to improve response and recovery capabilities and strengthen homeland security. Many are discrete and apply to very specific areas. Others are more general, with broader implications. A sample of findings with especially significant implications, both positive and negative, follows.

Lessons for Others to Emulate

1. The first responder fire and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) staff, along with the hospital emergency department and treatment physicians, nurses, and technicians, managed to rescue, evacuate to area hospitals, and treat 186 patients, many with critical injuries. Every victim evacuated from the site by EMS rescue units arrived safely at area hospitals. About 50 additional victims reported to hospitals on their own. With a total of approximately 230 injured victims, this was a monumental accomplishment.
2. The Rhode Island Office of the Medical Examiner (OME), supported by a Federal Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT), and volunteers from the Rhode Island Funeral Director's Association, the Rhode Island Dental Association, and from the Rhode Island Department of Health (RI Health), performed 96 autopsies and victim identification investigations in less than 5 days. An average of 35 professionals worked in 12-hour, round-the-clock shifts until every deceased victim was accounted for and the family notified.
3. The Family Assistance Center (FAC) and the Family Resource Center (FRC) proved to be very valuable in the response and recovery process. The FAC, patterned after the approach used to offer safe haven to families of victims following the 1999 crash of EgyptAir flight 990 and other commercial airline crashes, protected the grieving families from external intrusions and offered physical, psychological, emotional, and faith-based support while awaiting definitive identification of missing family members. Representatives from State, local, and Federal agencies, as well as voluntary organizations at the FRC, provided assistance to surviving victims and family members in applying for and obtaining government benefits and entitlements as well as support from private charities.
4. Fundraising and the distribution of funds to survivors, their families, and the families of the deceased were accomplished in exceptional fashion. The generosity of Rhode Island citizens immediately fueled the Station Nightclub Fire Relief Fund (SNFRF), while the external oversight committee appointed by Governor Carcieri established operating rules that enabled social workers to disburse funds promptly to meet the immediate needs of those suffering from the consequences of this tragedy. Sufficient money had been accumulated and disbursement and accountability mechanisms were established allowing the first SNFRF check to be issued on Thursday, February 27, just 1 day after the FRC opened.

Areas Requiring Significant Improvements

1. The Statewide Rhode Island emergency management system failed to function effectively. Emergency response and recovery plans are badly out of date and do not incorporate current emergency management doctrine. RIEMA did not serve as the management focal point providing regular situation reports and updates to the governor with information from the incident site, FAC, medical examiner, healthcare facilities and public safety organizations, charitable groups, and the myriad of other organizations engaged in response and recovery activities. The heart of this system is RIEMA. It suffers from years of insufficient funding, inadequate facilities and equipment, and deficiencies in organization and staffing. RIEMA has many dedicated and competent staff members whose contributions in support of West Warwick and at the FAC and FRC are described throughout this report, but dedication and hard work cannot overcome systemic flaws. In light of the unique relationship between State and municipal governments in Rhode Island, it might also be poorly positioned within the Rhode Island Military Department. Elsewhere in the country, local governments confronted with emergency conditions turn first to county political jurisdictions before seeking help from the State. In Rhode Island, there is no intervening county government. The State is the first recourse for help when disaster strikes a local community, and it must be able to respond in a quick, decisive, and fully coordinated manner. Significant improvement is needed in this area.
2. The Rhode Island OME failed to respond with sufficient resources and experienced leadership to measure and meet the requirements of this demanding incident. Despite early and repeated warnings that this was an event with significant fatalities, the OME never marshaled the necessary investigative and transportation resources. The on-scene OME investigator was clearly overwhelmed by the circumstances at the Station club, yet neither the chief medical examiner nor any other senior OME staff member visited the scene. As a result, EMS rescue units, as well as administrative vans with drivers untrained in transporting the deceased, were pressed into service by Incident Command.
3. There was little communication between receiving hospitals and the incident site or with inbound EMS units transporting patients. Patients arrived unannounced at hospital emergency departments, often in rapid sequence. Receiving hospitals assigned physicians and nurses to patients on a first-come, first-served basis without the advantage of minimum advanced planning. This was compounded by the fact that patients were transported to hospitals from the incident site without the benefit of information concerning hospital capacities and capabilities. This should not have been the case as the capability to obtain such information was in place and an early survey of hospitals during emergency conditions is common practice. Unfortunately, the deficiencies in Statewide emergency response plans, interagency coordination, and regularly scheduled drills involving dispatch centers, EMS units, and hospital emergency departments were apparent on this occasion.
4. The Rhode Island emergency management system suffers from inadequate policies, plans, procedures, and technologies. Symptomatic of these deficiencies is the absence of a Statewide alert and notification system that provides timely notification to senior officials in relevant government agencies. Although the Statewide 9-1-1 system alerts police, fire, and EMS organizations, most Rhode Island agency leaders learned about this event in the same way as the general public, from public news sources or telephone calls from

relatives, friends, or associates. Even if a Statewide alert and notification system were in place and used to immediately contact all relevant government agencies, most agencies do not have internal alert and notification procedures in place. For example, even though elements of RI Health knew about the fire as early as 11:30 p.m. and the Rhode Island OME was continuously engaged in recovery operations beginning shortly after midnight, no one called Dr. Patricia Nolan, the department director. Thus, the cabinet officer responsible to the governor for the health and well-being of Rhode Island citizens learned of the event from the Friday morning news. There is also a system to alert area hospitals of a mass casualty event using Nextel radios—it was not used when the Station club fire occurred.

It is difficult to conceive of a more terrifying and helpless situation than imminent death by fire without hope of escape—the smoky darkness, the toxic fumes and superheated air, the uncontrollable advance of all-consuming flames, and the press of the bodies of other terrified, screaming persons. This report describes the actions that occurred on the night of February 20, 2003, and the days, weeks, and months that followed as told by the broad community who responded to the tragedy and participated in the recovery process.



Patricia Hirsch